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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ABUJA 002891

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STATE FOR U/S KAREN HUGHES, AF/W, AF/PD, AF/R, AF/RSA,
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KMDR, SCUL

SUBJECT: RAMADAN OUTREACH REVEALS CRITICISM, COMMENDATION

Classified By: Ambassador John Campbell, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: During the month of Ramadan (September 24–October 23), Embassy Abuja organized several public-speaking engagements, media outreach, and Iftar events to discuss U.S. policy toward the Muslim world and Muslim life in America. Local media outlets reported favorably and widely the impact and exhaustiveness of Embassy Ramadan outreach activities throughout the Nigerian Muslim community.

¶2. (C) While generally responsive to and appreciative of Post's outreach attempts, some Nigerian Muslims also exploited our forums to malign USG policy objectives in the Muslim world as evidence of either unequivocal or latent hostility towards Muslims and Islam. The animosity we witnessed underscores the lack of access to reliable information, capacity of ideologically-driven individuals to influence and contort youth opinion, marginalization felt by large segments of the Nigerian Muslim community, and self-incorporation of Northern Nigeria into the vicissitudes confronting the global Islamic community, particularly with respect to its affairs with the West. END SUMMARY.

UNIVERSITY AND MOSQUE EXCHANGES: ADDRESSING INTER-FAITH
DIALOGUE, SHOWCASING AMERICAN MUSLIM LIFE

¶3. (C) Under the aegis of Department's Brain Trust initiative, PDOFF and PolOff conceived a three-part Ramadan lecture series in collaboration with Abuja-based al-Habibiyah Islamic Society to address the importance of inter-faith dialogue and showcase American Muslim life. PolOff delivered the inaugural lecture, entitled "Achieving a Dialogue of Civilizations", to a diverse, capacity audience at the University of Abuja, Faculty of Law (Gwagwalada) on September 26. Other guest speakers included Dr. Taofiq Abdulazeez, Professor of English; Dr. Kabir Mato, Professor of Political Science; and University of Abuja Muslim Student Society President.

¶4. (C) Dr. Taofiq Abdulazeez appeared suspicious, at times livid during the course of his diatribe against U.S. foreign policy objectives in the Muslim world, insisting that USG military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan have "fueled dislike and suspicion of American intentions" among the Nigerian Muslim community. Aggravating endemic anti-American sentiment in the crowd, Dr. Kabir Mato sanctioned suicide

bombing as "justifiable resistance" though stopped short of endorsing violence against Americans.

¶15. (C) PolOff attempted to calm tensions by amending a prepared speech with refutations to Abdulazeez and Mato's extemporaneous commentary, noting that "by speaking to each other in a fraternity of cooperation and mutual respect we are reminded not only of the plurality and diversity of our views, but also of our unique ability to work together towards a shared goal." Furthermore, PolOff emphasized the innumerable contributions of American Muslims to making the U.S. a place of esteemed tolerance and co-existence. The ensuing Q & A session revealed student audience hostility and parroting of Abdulazeez's virulent views.

¶16. (C) Contacts later noted that PolOff's remarks detailing the positive experience of American Muslims and subsequently covered by several Nigerian newspapers, aided in diffusing antagonism and "providing food for thought." Moreover, sources averred that dismissing Abdulazeez and Mato as "merely blowing off steam" does not vitiate the fact that they typify the attitude of "average Muslims" in Nigeria. Public Affairs FSNs distributed copies of PolOff's speech during the event and, upon request, several occasions thereafter.

¶17. (C) With the support of United States Institute of Peace (USIP)-funded Kaduna-based Inter-faith Mediation Center: Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum, on October 2 PolOff presented a second in a three-part lecture series speech addressing the importance of inter-religious dialogue at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria. The Forum's principal architects, Imam Dr. Muhammad Nurayn Ashafa, Imam Muhammad

ABUJA 00002891 002 OF 004

Sani Isah, and Pastor James Movel Wuye joined PolOff in expounding upon the critical role youth exercise in thwarting Christian-Muslim violence in Northern Nigeria. During Q & A, audience members quarreled about the impetus for inter-religious violence in Nigeria, highlighting deep fissures in Christian-Muslim communal relations. Particularly worrisome, noted several audience members, given the notorious history of neighboring Kaduna's religious rioting in 2000 and 2002 as well as the Nigerian proclivity for religious identity politicking, is the facility with which religious passions may be inflamed and manipulated in the run-up to the 2007 elections.

¶18. (C) In the last of the series of lectures, PolOff in concert with Ustaz Abubakar Siddeeq Muhammad of Abuja Central Mosque and recent International Visitor Program grantee Imam Fouad Adjemi spoke on the topic of "Community Responsibilities in Islam" at the demolished grounds of al-Habibiyyah Islamic Society in Abuja on October 9. (Note: Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Minister Nasir el-Rufai razed al-Habibiyyah Mosque in early August 2006, reportedly for violation of city zoning laws. Al-Habibiyyah Founder Imam Fouad maintains the demolition's illegality and currently is negotiating with FCT Minister el-Rufai for an out-of-court settlement. End Note.) Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) covered the event and thrice featured PolOff's remarks on "Community in Islam: An American Muslim Perspective" during its popular early morning transmission "Suhur Live."

MEDIA OUTREACH: EXPLAINING MUSLIM LIFE IN AMERICA, USG POLICY VIS--VIS THE MUSLIM WORLD

¶19. (U) On October 3, PolOff appeared on Kano State Television for a discussion of U.S. policy towards the Muslim world and Muslim life in America, aired during primetime Saturday. PolOff fielded questions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Global War on Terror, USG support for democratization in the Muslim world, and American Muslims. During the hour-long call-in show "Bakin Zaren" at

Freedom Radio on October 4, PolOff spoke about challenges to development and democratization in Africa, USG policy towards Nigeria, and American Muslim civic, political, and religious life. (Note: Private station Freedom Radio commenced operations in December 2003, conceiving of itself as the opposition's answer to the government-owned Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria. The Nigerian National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) briefly suspended Freedom Radio's broadcasting on March 27, 2006, reportedly for playing anti-Third Term music. End Note.) Embassy Ramadan outreach activities closed on October 20 with an interview at Abuja's Hot FM, in which PolOff detailed the breadth of Ramadan activities and spoke about life in America as an American Muslim.

IFTAR EVENTS UNCOVER CRITICISM AND COMMENDATION

¶10. (U) The Ramadan tradition of gathering to break fast and share a meal, known as Iftar, underscores the rite's communal nature as well as its importance as a vehicle through which ideas and information are exchanged. Undoubtedly, USG Iftar hosting respectfully acknowledges the centrality of Ramadan and its spirit of togetherness for the Nigerian Muslim community.

¶11. (C) On September 28, Ambassador John Campbell hosted members of the Diplomatic Corps and the Nigerian Muslim community. Guests from the Diplomatic Corps included the Ambassadors of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Egypt, Lebanon, Turkey and senior-level representatives of Morocco, Canada, and Trinidad and Tobago. Prominent Nigerian guests included former National Security Agency Director, former Inspector General of Police, House of Representative Minority Leader, Chair of the House Committee on Appropriations, Founding Member and Board of Trustee of the ruling Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), as well as Editor-in-Chief of the "Daily Trust" (Northern Nigeria's most influential newspaper), several business leaders and high-level representatives of the Minister of Defense and the Chief Imam of Abuja Central

ABUJA 00002891 003 OF 004

Mosque.

¶12. (U) Attendees welcomed Ambassador Campbell's remarks highlighting Muslim contributions to the American religious landscape. EmbOffs engaged guests on a host of domestic and international issues, most notably the 2007 elections and the extant Obasanjo-Abubakar impasse. While acknowledging USG efforts to dialogue with Muslims world-wide, several guests stressed the critical need to maintain contact with Muslim religious leaders and youth, in particular.

¶13. (C) PolCouns hosted on October 2 a joint Iftar for prominent male and female leaders in Kaduna's Muslim community. Participants included former President, General Muhammad Buhari, three Kaduna gubernatorial candidates, National and State Assembly members, and leading business, media, and civil society actors. Following PolCouns' remarks emphasizing U.S. respect for Islam, General Buhari, widely viewed as the most credible, honest, and capable candidate to lead Nigeria in 2007, publicly lauded USG efforts at democracy promotion in Nigeria. While underscoring the immensity of the task given rampant corruption and lack of transparency, Buhari solicited continued USG support for democratization, observing that "democracy is the only political system that can work in Nigeria."

¶14. (SBU) PolOff hosted female contacts in a private room, stressing in her remarks the importance of building and maintaining alliances with Kaduna's vociferous female Muslim populace - noting its extensive participation in civic, political, and religious life. Appreciative, though surprised at and suspicious of USG intentions to reach out to the Nigerian Muslim community, many women used the Iftar as a

forum to criticize the U.S., decrying U.S. military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan as evidence of deep-seated antipathy towards Muslims. Guests queried current USG intentions vis--vis the Nigerian Muslim community, stating that the 1994 closure of the U.S. Consulate in Kaduna and subsequent perceived Mission bias towards the "Christian" South served to exacerbate, if not irrevocably dissolve (as posited by some) relations by effectively disbanding USG communication with the Muslim North.

¶15. (C) PolCouns convened a second group of Northern political, leaders on October 3 in Northern Nigeria's commercial epicenter, Kano. Deputy Governor of Kano, Ciroman (Crown Prince) and eldest son of Kano Emir Sanusi Ado Bayero, Manufacturers Association of Nigeria National President, Dantata Co. Deputy Director, former civilian and military Kano Governors, and representatives of the Kano State Council of Ulama, Lebanese and academic community, media and film industry (Kannywood), and Chamber of Commerce joined sixty other guests at the Iftar. PolCouns and PolOffs entertained discussions on likely 2007 candidates, Obasanjo's posturing and maneuvering to elongate term in office, and U.S. policy towards Palestine.

¶16. (C) Dismissing notions of U.S. policy objectives in the Muslim world as guided by the desire to undermine Islamic activism and religious expression, Deputy Governor of Kano, Engineer Magaji Abdullahi, hailed the Iftar as evidence of "America's goodwill towards Muslims."

¶17. (C) Playing host to notable Kano women, including Commissioner of Women Affairs Dr. Fatima Gaji Dantata, media, academic, and religious sector contacts, PolOff addressed ubiquitous criticism of U.S. policy vis--vis the Islamic world to an exceedingly impassioned and aggressive audience. PolOff debunked conspiratorial, conjectural statements regarding USG attitudes towards Muslims.

¶18. (C) Country PAO Atim George, accompanied by USAID, NIH, and PolOffs, assembled accomplished Abuja women, including House Assembly member Saudatu Sani, Senatorial aspirant Ireti Kingibe, and other seminal civil society actors at the Chief of Mission Residence on October 11. The Iftar's informal tenor allowed for candid discussion on obstacles to women's empowerment in Nigeria.

AND HORSES, TOO

ABUJA 00002891 004 OF 004

¶19. (U) To cap off the month of Ramadan, Nigerian traditional leaders host a series of parades and displays of horsemanship beginning on the "Sallah Day" holiday. PolCouns participated in two parades during the celebrations, riding through the streets of Dutse, Jigawa State, with the Emir of Duste and a half-mile long entourage of horses, camels, snakes and hyenas. Throughout the 6-mile ride, the streets were lined with onlookers seeking a look at the Emir and exchanging greetings with the participants. The presence of PolCouns was widely noted and both television and radio broadcasts of the event featured the U.S. Mission's participation prominently.

¶20. (U) Repeating the performance in Zaria, headquarters of the Zazzau Emirate in Kaduna State, PolCouns again rode through the streets, this time with the "Prince," Yeriman Zazzau. An even greater crowd attended and the Kaduna State Television station interviewed many onlookers who expressed their delight with U.S. Embassy participation and commented on the respect and concern shown by the USG towards Nigeria's development.

COMMENT: SUSTAINED ENGAGEMENT, MEANINGFUL DIALOGUE

¶21. (C) While the amount of goodwill generated by Embassy Ramadan outreach efforts is apparent through overwhelmingly positive media coverage and numerous tte--ttes with contacts, Post contends that sustained engagement, meaningful dialogue, increased utilization of radio and television media, and willingness to reach out to diverse audiences are the best way to address pervasive anti-American sentiment, particularly among impressionable Northern Nigerian youth.

¶22. (C) Predictably, Northern Nigerian antipathy towards America stems from profound misinformation and cognition of Nigeria as constituent member of the global Islamic community, which adjures its allegiance, loyalty, and empathy. Exchanges involving American Muslim personalities, capable and willing to elucidate their positive experiences as vital civic, political, and religious actors in American society gainfully illustrates American amity towards Muslims, discredits more incendiary views, and aids in mollifying aggressive audiences. Importantly, the decorous statement that "America is waging a war on Islam" tentatively serves to undermine the gamut of Mission policy objectives, including democracy promotion, education and healthcare sector reform, and HIV-AIDS treatment and prevention as ideologically-driven Nigerians seek to impute ulterior motives to USG actions.

END COMMENT.

CAMPBELL